do you know what that's worth? by GhostGrantaire

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Summary:

"Come on, Max, will you just tell me what's going on? I know you didn't drive up here for no reason. What's bothering you?"

"Everything!" she yelled, finally stopping to look at him. Steve stopped walking as well, looking at her in shock. "Everything's bothering me! And you... you've got this great family and shit, and now you're moving even further away and I'm gonna still be stuck in fucking Hawkins!"

do you know what that's worth?

Author's Note:

For IrisVioletta.

Happy birthday to one of my favorite writers on the planet! Love you, Lara < 3

January 25th, 1989

Max swung into the driveway, throwing the old station wagon in park and sitting back, staring at the house. She wondered if she should've called first, but it was far too late for that now. After a second, she climbed out of the car and jogged up to the house, knocking firmly at the door.

Nancy greeted her at the door, which Max really hadn't prepared herself for. She smiled, hoping it came across less awkward than she felt. Nancy blinked at her for a couple seconds before smiling gently and opening the door wider. "Hey Max, come on in."

Max walked in awkwardly, shoving her hands into her pockets and glancing around at the house. She'd been here a few times now, but she didn't usually just show up like this, and she suddenly felt like she was in the wrong place.

"Do you want anything to drink? Coffee? Juice?" Nancy asked, making a move towards the cabinet. Max shook her head quickly.

"No, I'm fine," she said quickly. "Thanks."

Nancy nodded and smiled at her. "Are you doing alright?"

Max shrugged, smiling awkwardly. "Um, yeah, I'm okay. Uh, you?"

Nancy smiled at the question. "I'm great. How's my baby brother? He hasn't annoyed you all to death yet, has he?"

Max chuckled at her teasing question. "Not yet."

Nancy laughed back and looked at the clock. "I actually have to run to class soon, but I'll go tell Steve you're here, alright?"

Max bit back the instinctive "no, that's alright." She was here to see him, after all. It'd be way weirder for her to just wait in this house by herself.

Nancy disappeared down the small hallway to where the bedroom was, and Max hopped up to sit on the counter as she waited. She fidgeted as she waited, undoing her short braids only to redo them seconds later. She was still getting used to her short hair, which she'd cut off on a whim earlier that month. She was seconds away from undoing them again for lack of anything better to do when Nancy returned, grabbing her purse from the counter.

"He's awake, shouldn't be too long," she explained with a smile. "Have a good day, yeah?"

Max smiled at her, throwing out a small "you too," before Nancy disappeared through the front door. She waited for a minute or two, unsure of what to do with herself before hopping down from the counter and walking over to the fridge. It was covered in photos and papers-- Nancy's latest essay, Jonathan's diploma, letters from Will, Mike, and even Max herself. Max had to wonder about the domesticity of it all.

"Hey kiddo." Max spun around just as Steve trudged out from the hallway, wearing an old T-shirt and a loose pair of jeans. His hair was a mess, and he was wearing his glasses instead of his contacts. He looked tired but happy, and Max felt relief wash over her at just the sight of him. She offered him a small smile.

"Hey asshole," she shot back, and he grinned at her as he reached for a mug out of the cabinet.

"You want coffee?" He asked her, and she made a face in return, making him chuckle. He poured himself a cup and put a generous amount of milk before throwing the milk back in the fridge and turning towards her.

"So. You told someone you were coming up here, right? I don't need

to call someone before Hopper sends out a search party?" Steve asked seriously as he looked at her. Max sent him an annoyed glare.

"Yes, *Dad*," she shot back, and he raised his eyebrows, clearly not convinced. She rolled her eyes. "I told Lucas. I had to, seeing as I took his car."

He held up his hands innocently and took another sip of his coffee. She figured she may deserve the questions, seeing as she'd definitely taken off without question before. Steve hadn't reacted well when he'd found out about that. "You want eggs?"

Max nodded, already moving to grab the eggs out of the fridge. Steve grinned at her and crossed to the small stereo sitting on the counter, flicking through the stations until landing on some pop station playing Belinda Carlisle.

They made eggs together, working easily enough although Steve did use Max as a napkin for extra egg yolk, and Max couldn't resist stuff an empty egg shell down his shirt. Max had missed this sibling teasing-- she had ever since Steve had first left for college. She was happy to know it hadn't changed, even five years after she'd first met him.

While Steve scooped the eggs onto a couple of plates, Max popped a couple of pieces of bread into the toaster, pouring herself a glass of juice while she waited.

They joked as they ate, continuing to flick pieces of food at each other and kick each other under the table. After they'd been eating for about ten minutes, a noise from the hallway caught their attention.

Jonathan stumbled out of the hallway, wiping sleep from his eyes and wearing nothing but sweatpants that Max guessed were actually Steve's judging by their length.

"Hi Jonathan," she said with a laugh. He stopped, blinking at her in confusion.

"Hi Max," he greeted slowly, his face flushing slightly.

Steve leaned back in his chair, raising his eyebrows at his boyfriend. "Jonathan, for Christ's sake, put a damn shirt on. We've got company!"

Jonathan sent him a harsh look of annoyance before grumbling about how "nobody tells him anything" and trudging back to the bedroom. Steve grinned at Max, and she returned it, continuing to munch away at her eggs.

After a couple minutes, Jonathan reemerged, this time clothed and definitely more awake. He greeted Max again with a smile and flicked Steve's head in lieu of a good morning before grabbing some coffee and a piece of toast and taking a seat at the table.

"Morning, sweetheart," Steve teased, blowing him a kiss, and Jonathan just rolled his eyes, unimpressed with the pet name. Max chuckled at them as she took another bite of her toast.

"When did you get here, Max?" Jonathan asked from across the table.

"Like half an hour ago. Nancy let me in," she responded through a mouthful of bread and jam. Steve raised his eyebrows at her, looking grossed out, and she just stuck out her tongue, which was still covered in food. Jonathan just laughed at them both.

After a second of eating, Jonathan looked over at Max, a crease in between his eyebrows. "Hey, how did Nancy seem this morning?"

Max raised her eyebrows at him, confused. "Um, normal? I don't know."

Steve rolled his eyes, looking at Jonathan seriously. "Can you please just apologize and move on? You guys are driving me crazy."

"She started it!" Jonathan protested weakly.

"Yeah and you took it way too far, dude. Just give it up," Steve threw back. Max frowned, looking back and forth between them.

"She doesn't want to talk to me," Jonathan mumbled, staring at his coffee.

"Oh my god, man," Steve shook his head in exasperation. "She's at the lab this afternoon, just bring her lunch or something and talk it out. I'm getting really sick of this mediator crap."

Jonathan sighed, but shrugged all the same, taking a bite of eggs. Max really wanted to ask what it was all about, but Jonathan spoke up again before she could. "What're you guys gonna do today?"

Steve shrugged. "Who knows, we'll find something to do. What about you? You hanging out here today?"

Jonathan made a face. "No, I've gotta go find more places to apply for part-time."

Steve grimaced. "That sucks. You'll be fine though, someone will hire you in no time. And then I'll be left here all by myself."

"Not my fault you quit your job," Jonathan grumbled back. "Besides, I've got to pick up your slack now."

Steve chuckled, and Jonathan smiled back as he reached over with his fork to snatch eggs off of his boyfriend's plate.

Conversation drifted around different topics. Steve and Jonathan continued to bicker about stupid things, and Max took turns siding with each of them, laughing through it all. After they'd all finished eating, Max helped Jonathan stack everything in the dishwasher while Steve went to go change into some real clothes.

It took Steve about half an hour to get ready, much to Jonathan's amusement and Max's frustration. She was ready to just pull him out of the bathroom, hair done or not, when he finally came out. She didn't waste any time in saying bye to Jonathan before pushing Steve outside.

It was colder outside, sky dark like it was going to snow at any minute, but the forecast for that day hadn't been too bad, so she wasn't worried. She was grateful for the warm puffy jacket she'd grabbed. It was too big for her, and she tried to remember who she'd stolen it from. Dustin, probably. Steve looked a bit less dressed for the weather, only a pair of jeans and his worn out St. Louis Cardinal's sweatshirt, but he never seemed to mind bad weather.

"So," Steve mused as they wandered down the street, heading towards the school like they always did. "What's going on?"

Max huffed a sigh, kicking at the snow lining the sidewalks as they walked. "I'm dropping out of school," she explained dramatically.

Steve raised his eyebrows at her. "You're not dropping out," he corrected easily, and she glared at him.

"Why not? You dropped out," she shot back.

"Yeah, of *college*," he amended, not missing a beat. "And I'm probably going back anyway."

Max didn't say anything to that. She didn't look up until Steve nudged her slightly. He looked like his usual sympathetic self, and she sighed. "It's just stupid. Everyone's going on and on about college and internships and jobs and I just... I'm not *ready*, Steve. Mike's set for Purdue, and Lucas and Dustin are going to Michigan or whatever, but I'm just... in limbo or something."

"So what?" Steve asked.

She glanced at him, unsure of how much she really wanted to talk about. After a second she just shrugged, forcing a smile. "I don't know. It's just annoying I guess. Not a big deal."

He raised his eyebrows, clearly wanting to push the matter, but she really didn't want to talk about everything yet, so she changed the subject.

"How's domestic bliss?" Max teased as she balanced on the edge of the curb. She liked feeling taller like this-- he was only a couple inches above her at this point.

Steve laughed. "Surprisingly blissful," he answered back. He nudged her, clearly trying to disrupt her balance, but she righted herself and kept going, throwing him a finger in response. Steve was grinning casually, but Max knew she meant what he'd said. Jonathan had finished up at NYU the semester before, happy to graduate early and move to Indianapolis with the others, and Max knew how excited Steve had been to get him back.

"I bet it's nice to have your boyfriend back," she teased, raising her eyebrows at him. She loved teasing him about Nancy and Jonathan, even though he usually just took it in stride. "What was that stuff about him and Nancy earlier?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "Some stupid fight from yesterday. I don't even remember what it was about. Nancy was annoyed about something, and Jonathan has a tendency to escalate arguments. Not his best quality."

Despite his words, Steve sounded nothing but fond. Max still frowned. "Do you guys fight a lot?"

Steve glanced at her, clearly not expecting the question. "Not really. I mean, a normal amount? Maybe more, but there's three of us so I guess that's probably okay. But we also get the benefit of having a mediator on standby at all times, so I can't complain. They'll be good by tomorrow, though, we're all shit at staying mad at each other."

Max hummed, hopping off of the curb as they waited to cross the street. "Jonathan isn't sick of living with you guys yet?"

"Excuse you, I happen to be a delightful person to live with," Steve shot back, and she laughed at that.

"Sure you are," Max taunted back. "Maybe I'll just have to move in with you guys next year. Indianapolis isn't too bad."

Steve laughed, but there was something strange about it, and Max frowned over at him. He caught her eye, frowning slightly.

"What?" She asked. They crossed the street, making their way towards the bridge that crossed the river, which was lined with snow and ice, the trees on either side of it bare.

"Now's probably a good time to mention... just so you know. We haven't actually decided anything, but you know that Nancy's been applying to grad school, right?" Steve started hesitantly. Max narrowed her eyes but nodded. "Well, most of the schools are on the west coast. California, mainly."

He was watching her carefully, and Max raised her eyebrows. "So?"

Steve looked down before meeting her eyes again. "So, if she gets in, and I really can't imagine her not getting in because it's *Nancy...* well, we're gonna move. All of us."

She blinked at him, her mind suddenly blank. "You're moving to California?" She repeated the sentiment back slowly.

"It's not certain," he assured her. "But probably."

Max stared at him for a long moment, lips parted in surprise. She could feel anger bubbling up in her chest, and her heart rate sped up slightly. Steve was still watching her, looking almost anxious about what she was going to say next.

"But-- I thought you liked Indianapolis! You were always going on about how much better it was than Hawkins, and how your house was great and the museums and theatres and the--"

"I know, I know," Steve cut in. "And I wasn't lying. It's great."

"Then why would you give that up?" Max exclaimed, throwing her arms in the air. "You don't even know if you'll like California, why just pack up and move across the damn country?"

Steve paused. He glanced at her with a frown before sighing and turning towards her. "You remember the summer after I graduated? How Nancy, Jon, and I went on that road trip with the insane quest of hunting monsters?"

Max nodded though she figured it went without saying.

"I didn't do that because I was desperate to see the Midwest, or because I just have a thing for putting myself in situations of mortal peril," Steve continued. "I went because Nancy and Jonathan asked me to."

"So?" Max asked, not getting the point.

"So, that still stands for me. If Nancy came home tonight and said she didn't want to go to grad school and all she wanted to do was move back to Hawkins and own a bakery, I'd go with her. I may argue a bit first, but I'd go."

Max frowned at the thought, but Steve wasn't done. "Or if Jonathan said that the only way he was going to be happy was to move back into a tiny, dirty, basement apartment in New York City, I'd go, even though that sort of sounds like hell to me. I would never not follow them. I don't care where we end up. I like living in Indianapolis because of the people I'm living with. That's what matters."

She looked away after a second, feeling an utter sense of betrayal in her chest. She shook her head and began walking further down the bridge, not looking at him.

"Max," Steve called, sounding frustrated. "Come on, Max!"

"What?!" She snapped back, throwing the word over her shoulder. She stuffed her hands into her pockets and kept walking. "What do you want me to say? I'm happy for you, good for you, I'm so fucking glad that you've got everything you've ever wanted, okay?"

She heard Steve jog up to meet her, pulling her shoulders up to appear more closed off. She knew she was being immature, but she didn't care. This was the last thing she wanted to hear right now.

"Max," he said, drawing her name out like a father trying to calm a child, which only pissed her off more. "Come on, will you just tell me what's going on? I know you didn't drive up here for no reason. What's bothering you?"

"Everything!" she yelled, finally stopping to look at him. Steve stopped walking as well, looking at her in shock. "Everything's bothering me. And you... you've got this great family and shit, and now you're moving even further away and I'm gonna still be stuck in fucking Hawkins!"

She punctuated the last two words with hard kicks to the curb, causing a couple walking by to look over at them in surprise. Max didn't care. There was a long pause, and Max realized in embarrassment that her cheeks were warm not just with anger but with tears. She wiped at her face angrily, not looking at the man beside her.

"Is that what all this is about?" He asked gently. "Hawkins?"

Max sniffed harshly, turning away from him. She walked over to the railing of the bridge they'd wandered onto, leaning her elbows against it. Steve followed quietly, mirroring her posture, and there was a long moment of silence.

"I hate it there. I hate the way people look at me, like they're just waiting for me to fall off the edge." Max spat, staring down at the icy river beneath them. "They all think I'm gonna turn out like him."

Steve was watching her carefully. "Screw 'em," he replied easily.

Max huffed. She turned around and leaned against the railing, looking at the cars driving across the bridge. She didn't say anything right away, and when she spoke up again, her words sounded weaker than she meant for them to be. "But what if they're right?"

She didn't dare look at Steve's reaction. She plowed ahead. "I mean, you can say over and over again that I'm not like Billy, but I am. I'm angry, and I'm reckless, and I can never keep my mouth shut--"

"So what?" Steve cut in, his voice sharp. She looked at him, surprised to see him looking somewhat upset by that. "I'm reckless, I'm not him. Nancy's angry about a lot of stuff, Jonathan's always spewing shit he shouldn't say, none of us are like your brother, are we?"

Max kicked some of the snow off the bridge, watching it fall towards the river, grinding her teeth together. "It's not the same."

"Bull*shit* it's not the same. It's exactly the same," Steve argued, turning to face her head on. "We've all got things in common. But that doesn't mean you're like Billy."

"Maybe not yet!" She shot back. "But what if I stay in Hawkins for the rest of my life? Who's to say I won't become exactly what he is?"

"You're not gonna stay in Hawkins," Steve responded, voice calm. "You're gonna get out."

"How do you know that?" She asked, her voice angry but somewhat desperate. She didn't realize until after she'd spoken that she was basically pleading for an answer.

"Because I've never seen someone in my entire life want to get out more than you. And I've also never seen you not get something you want," Steve answered steadily. Max stared at him for a long second before her shoulders dropped, the fight going out of her. She turned back to the river, placing her gloved hands on the railing and looking over.

"Then what am I gonna do? I'm not going to college, I already missed that opportunity," she grumbled sadly.

"El's not going to college either," Steve noted. "At least not yet. And I know Will's still deciding on a gap year or not. It's not just you."

Max shrugged. It was different for them. She wasn't sure why, but it just was.

"You're not gonna be on your own. There's plenty of stuff you can do without going to college. You can get a job, take a road trip, go to community college... anything you want." She looked up at Steve as he spoke, finding solace in his words.

"I just... I feel like everyone's got this plan. And I don't."

"Plans don't mean shit. Life does what it wants, there's no point trying to control it. You don't have to figure it out right now." Steve smiled at her.

Max just shrugged, still feeling unsure. "I guess."

"Look, kid, the moral of the story," he said, pausing as he turned to look at her. She raised her eyebrows. "The moral of the story is that being seventeen sucks. It just does. Everyone's an idiot, school tries its best to drain you dry, and if you're really unlucky, sometimes monsters try to kill you."

Max broke into a small smile at that, and Steve grinned wryly back. "But if you're lucky, you find some damn good people along the way who are suffering just as much. They make it worth it."

"So what, I should think positively because everything's gonna work out in the end?" She threw back sarcastically, raising her eyebrows. She hated when people talked like that.

Steve shrugged, looking genuine in his response. "It did for me."

Max bit her lip. She realized suddenly that it had started snowing again, a slow trickle of snowflakes settling on their clothing and hair. She pulled the jacket tighter around herself, leaning out over the water.

"I don't want you to move away," she confessed after a moment. Steve stopped smiling, looking at her with a sympathetic look in his eyes.

"Just because I'm not in Indiana doesn't mean I won't be around," he assured her gently. "You can't get rid of me that easily. Just ask Jonathan-- we were 700 miles away, and I still managed to bug the shit out of him."

She cracked a smile at that, letting out a huff of laughter, and he grinned. He turned back to the river, staring at the trees across the way. He chewed at his thumbnail, and Max knew he wanted a cigarette. Ever since he found out last year that she'd started smoking, he'd refused to smoke in front of her. They'd even made a pact that they'd quit together, but Max knew damn well he still smoked, just like he probably knew she did too. It didn't bother her, and Steve had never brought it up. It was just one of those things.

After a second, Max turned to stare at the trees as well. The snow had picked up a bit at this point, accumulating on the ground and on the bare trees.

Max blinked as a cardinal flew into her line of sight, perching on a tree branch. It looked like it was staring right at her, and felt slightly frightened as she stared back at it, feeling like she was somehow going to ruin this moment. It cocked its head at her, and she held her breath as she stared at its bright red form against the white.

After a long moment, it turned away from her and flew off into the grey sky. She watched it until it disappeared from view, letting out a long breath when she could no longer see it.

"Wanna head back?" Steve asked after they'd been standing over the water for close to ten minutes, not speaking. Max realized she was

shivering slightly, some of the snow seeping into her cotton sweatshirt. She pulled her arms tightly around herself and shrugged.

"Yeah, I guess," she answered.

Steve smiled and pushed himself off the railing. He slung an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a side hug as they began to walk back, and she laughed. "Come on, it's freezing. We'll watch a movie or some shit."

The front door opened shortly after they'd finished The Princess Bride and Max and Steve glanced over to see Nancy walk in, looking tired.

"Hey, how was class?" Steve called as Nancy threw her purse on the table. She flopped onto the couch next to him and laid down, using his lap as a pillow. He immediately smiled at her, threading her fingers through her hair.

"I want to throw my professor into the deepest pit of hell and watch what happens next," Nancy deadpanned. Max gave a shocked laugh, not used to that side of Mike's older sister, and Steve just smirked.

"Sounds like a good day then," he mused back, and Nancy punched his leg.

"Jonathan stopped by," she mentioned, her voice strangely light. "He brought me lunch."

"That was nice of him," Steve answered back, eyes flickering to his girlfriend. "You guys good?"

"Yeah, we're good," Nancy said with an amused smile. She pushed herself up and kissed his cheek. "You're off the hook. You were a terrible arbitrator anyway."

Steve grinned at her, and they kissed lightly, making Max roll her eyes. Nancy sat up then, looking back at the kitchen. "What's for dinner?"

Steve shrugged. "Pizza, I think. Jonathan forgot to buy pasta."

He rolled his eyes and Nancy chuckled, shoving his arm. "Why do we even keep him around?" She teased with a laugh before looking at Max. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"Nah," Max answered back, getting to her feet. "I should actually head back. Lucas goes crazy when he's apart from his baby for too long."

Nancy frowned, clearly trying to connect the dots, and Max laughed. "I meant his car," she clarified in amusement, and Nancy rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Alright then." Nancy got to her feet. "I'll get you some snacks for the road, yeah?"

Max threw her a grateful smile as she pulled her boots on and went to fetch her jacket from where it was drying.

"You sure you don't wanna stay?" Steve asked, and Max knew that if she did change her mind, he wouldn't mind at all. She was thankful for that, but she nodded all the same.

"I'm okay," she assured him, and she really didn't feel like she was lying.

Nancy got her a couple oranges, some Goldfish, and a bottle of water for the road, which Max took with a smile as she made her way to the front door.

"Tell El and the boys we say hi, yeah?" Nancy spoke up, and Max nodded. Nancy pulled her into a sweet hug, which Max returned happily before pulling back and making her way outside, Steve right behind her.

As soon as they were outside, Max turned to Steve and hugged him tightly, feeling her chest tighten. She was glad he'd gotten out of Hawkins, but she also hated leaving him behind.

"Drive safe, kiddo," he muttered as he hugged her back. She nodded, still not letting go. After a long embrace, she pulled back, embarrassed to feel her eyes burning. He grinned at her. "You're

gonna be fine, Max. Seriously. You've got this."

She nodded, feeling slightly more confident, like maybe she could pull this off after all. "Thanks," she said back after a moment, and he smiled at that, pulling at a strand of her hair.

"Call if you need anything," he reminded her, and she took that as her cue to leave. She fished Lucas' keys out of her back pocket and jogged over to the station wagon, casting one last look to the house before climbing in.

The drive back to Hawkins was easy, the snow light enough that it didn't impede her driving. She passed her house without stopping and continued through the small streets until she pulled over in front of the Wheeler's house.

Karen Wheeler greeted her at the door, offering her a gentle smile before letting Max escape to the basement.

"Hey losers," she greeted as she walked down the stairs. The five of them looked up her, smiling happily at her arrival. El and Dustin were hogging the couch, Mike leaning against El's legs, and Lucas and Will shared the table.

"How was the drive?" Mike asked, leaning his head back on El's knees so he could look up at her.

"Good," she answered truthfully, tossing Lucas his keys. "Although I did scrape a guardrail on the way back."

Lucas was up in a second, a look of pure horror on his face. She burst out laughing, and Lucas glared at her. He shoved at her and she pushed him back, and they play-wrestled for a few moments before they both faded into laughter. Lucas collapsed back into his chair and Max squirmed her way into the middle of the couch.

She leaned against El and Dustin, using them both as a makeshift pillow while Mike and Lucas bickered about Star Trek and Will interjected sarcastic comments as he worked in his sketchbook. She closed her eyes, feeling the day wash over her in exhaustion.

She thought about how Lucas had handed over his keys that morning

without question, simply knowing she'd needed to be *not there*, and the number of times he'd driven her out of the city when she felt like she'd die staying in Hawkins for another moment. She thought about the way that Dustin always asked if anyone was hungry, and how he always had a spare bag of chips just in case someone (usually her or Will) responded positively. She thought about the pack of cigarettes that Mike always kept in his back pocket, even though they all knew that Max was the only one who'd ever touch the damn things. She thought about the way El always made sure the spare key to Hopper's house was in the same place, just in case Max needed to get out. She thought about how Will had never complained, not once, about helping Max with her homework when the numbers just didn't make sense, and how they never doubted her intelligence, even when she got C's in regular physics and they'd gotten A's in their honors courses.

They'd accepted her without question, never once focusing on the things that set her apart from the rest of them and instead placing their attention on the things that they had in common.

Max thought back to Steve's house in Indianapolis, and the way that the three of them had transformed their home into a safe haven of understanding and acceptance when the rest of the world refused to offer it. And as she looked around at all of them, six 17-year-olds squished together in the Wheeler's dark basement, she wondered if they'd done the same thing.

She still hated Hawkins-- she'd hate it until the day she left. Maybe she'd miss it one day, but that day was far in the future. But as much as she hated this place, she couldn't help but be grateful. It was just about finding the right people, as Steve said. Max had found some pretty damn good people.

Author's Note:

This was literally just an excuse to write about everyone being domestic with everyone else. Also here is a moodboard I made for this fic for no reason in particular

Come talk to me on tumble!